

Development, Individual Differences, and Classroom

Eric's Last Stand

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The call came over the loud speaker for me to go immediately to Mrs. Lang's trailer. I could tell by the sound of the secretary's voice that something was terribly wrong. I dismissed my older resource students and asked my teaching assistant to watch my two remaining students, who were from Mrs. Lang's second grade class. The look in these students' eyes told me they were frightened because they knew something was happening in their classroom.

I ran over to Mrs. Lang's trailer and saw her standing outside with her students. I could see our assistant principal Mrs. Lunsford, standing in the doorway of the trailer. When she looked at me, her eyes warned me to proceed with caution. I could hear the banging sound of desks hitting desks and the wailing of an upset little boy. When I reached the trailer, Mrs. Lunsford moved and allowed me to peek inside.

There he was, just a mite of a boy. Tears were streaming down his face like rain running down a window pane. I saw him kick a stuffed animal across the room like it was a kickball. He clenched his little fists by the sides of his head and brought them down in a quick jerk to his hips. He crossed his arms and pushed against his stomach as a loud groan filled the disarrayed classroom. He remained in that position for a few seconds and then very slowly and quietly raised his head. He seemed to be in a state of utter exhaustion. He just stood there, as if suspended in time.

I walked very slowly toward him and softly called his name. "Eric," I said, "let me sit on the rug and talk to you." He backed away from me like a suspicious animal. I

thought for a moment and slowly got down on my knees. We were eye-to-eye. I could feel that he was uncomfortable with that so I scrunched up my body a little bit and made myself shorter than Eric. I wasn't sure if he was going to lose it again and start whirling chairs around. I did know that I couldn't get up as fast as I used to and that maybe I had not made such a wise choice of seating positions. However, Eric began to show signs of feeling more at ease and so did I. My knees were starting to burn like fire so I sat down and stretched out my legs. Eric was still standing. I looked at him and very calmly said, "Eric, please bring me the stuffed bear that looks so lonely just sitting by himself. (This bear was the stuffed animal that Eric had kicked across the room.) He brought the bear to me. I examined it and asked Eric, "Do you see any places where he might be hurt?" Eric reached, for the bear, looked it over, and said, "I think he has a headache because he hit his head on the wall."

Mrs. Lunsford entered the classroom and told Eric that his mother was here to pick him up. Eric threw down the stuffed bear and ran out the door to find his mother. We followed and watched as a stout woman bent down and picked the little boy up. A big smile came over Eric's face.

"Mrs. Lunsford, I want to apologize for my son's behavior. May I meet with you and Mrs. Lang this afternoon around 3:30? My mother will be home and she can take care of Eric." After agreeing to meet with Mrs. Glover, Mrs. Lunsford thanked me for my help.

The next morning Mrs. Lang came to my classroom and asked if she could talk with me about Eric during her planning period. When we met at two o'clock, Mrs. Lang confessed, "I've never had an episode like that happen in my classroom! The only thing I could think to do was to get the other students outside so that nobody would get hurt. I

need to talk to you about Eric and his disruptive behavior. Mrs. Lunsford wanted to come, but she has an administrator's meeting."

Mrs. Lang began by giving me a little background information about Eric. He was seven years old and small for his age. Sometimes the other children in the class teased him about his small stature, but Eric usually just ignored it or laughed about it. His school attendance had been very good and he missed only two days as a first grader. Mrs. Lang had checked his health card and noted that he had passed his hearing and vision screenings. Eric's mother said he had asthma, but he had not had an attack in the two years he had attended our school.

Mrs. Lang continued by telling me that Mrs. Glover worked at a downtown hospital as a secretary. Eric's father, who was a skilled carpenter, had been unemployed for quite some time. Eric was an only child and he and his parents lived in a small subdivision that was home to people with low-medium incomes.

After Mrs. Lang finished, I asked her to tell me about Eric's behavior in class. "Before I answer your question, I should tell you what Mrs. Glover shared with me and Mrs. Lunsford yesterday. I think it might shed some light on the situation. You have to promise that you won't say anything to anybody about this. It is very confidential," said Mrs. Lang.

"Are you sure you are at liberty to tell me?" I asked. I was, thinking that perhaps the information should not be shared without Mrs. Glover's permission or without Mrs. Lunsford being at the meeting.

Mrs. Lang assured me that Mrs. Lunsford had requested that the information be shared with me because they both felt that Eric might have psychological problems. "We have already talked to the counselor and she will be talking to Eric soon," Mrs. said.

She proceeded to tell me a story that would tug at my heartstrings. Mrs. Glover told Mrs. Lang and Mrs. Lunsford that her husband was an alcoholic and had been for several years. When they first were married, she had no idea that Mr. Glover had a drinking problem. They had met at church and dated only a short time before marrying. She knew that he liked to go out with the boys once a week and really didn't mind until he started coming home drunk. She said he started drinking every night and on the job. He was warned several times by his boss that if he did not stop drinking, he would be fired. Mr. Glover continued to drink on the job, and eventually was fired.

Several months before he lost his job, Mr. Glover's behavior began to change. He would get angry easily and curse at his wife and son for no apparent reason. One day he hit his wife. His violent episodes increased and Eric would lock himself in the bathroom so that he would feel safe. Last summer Mr. Glover arrived home drunk and proceeded to beat Mrs. Glover in front of Eric. Eric was so afraid his daddy was going to kill his mama that he ran to another room and dialed 911. Within minutes, the police arrived and arrested Mr. Glover. Eric was afraid his daddy would be mad at him, but he was still glad he had saved his mama.

Because Mr. Glover had no prior record, he was sentenced to probation only. He promised his wife he would stop drinking and that he would never lay a hand on her again. To Eric's dismay, Mrs. Glover agreed to take him back.

Eric's behavior at home began to change. He would sometimes get mad at his daddy and throw things at him. He refused to do his homework and would occasionally tear up homework he had completed. Several times he locked himself in the bathroom, where he would fall asleep in the tub with his pillow and blanket.

I was so involved in Mrs. Lang's story I lost track of time. "You're really worried

about your day with Eric tomorrow aren't you?" I asked. Mrs. Lang told me she was really scared she would do the wrong thing and that Eric would get violently upset again. When I asked her what happened before Eric's outburst, she said students were correcting a worksheet that required them to identify the main idea and some details of a story. She had been working on this for some time, but I thought to myself that this might be difficult for some second graders.

Eric could state the main idea of the story, but had a hard time listing relevant details. When his paper was returned for him to make corrections, he threw it on the floor. When Mrs. Lang told Eric he would have detention unless he tried to correct his paper, he kicked his desk into another student's desk and knocked it over. Eric totally lost control when, in a loud voice, Mrs. Lang ordered him to pick the desk up.

Mrs. Lang told me that Eric had difficulty completing his classwork and often had to stay in from recess to finish it. If the work was still not completed, it was assigned as homework. She reassured me that Eric was capable of finishing his work, but that he just wasn't motivated.

Often, Mrs. Lang would assign her second graders to cooperative learning groups to work on reading, social studies, and science projects. Eric was uncooperative and complained that group members didn't want him in their group. Mrs. Lang removed him from the group, but Eric would refuse to work independently. On four of these occasions, Eric was sent to Mrs. Lunsford for disciplinary action.

The next day Mr. Shapiro, the principal, burst into my room yelling that he wanted "that Glover kid" tested for emotional disabilities as soon as possible. He said that Eric had tried to stab another student on the bus with a pencil and that he was out of control. Eric was in the office waiting for his mother to pick him up. Mr. Shapiro wanted

me to calm Eric down and to have evaluation permission forms ready for Mrs. Glover's signature.

When I arrived at the office, Eric was crying uncontrollably and trying to pull away from Mrs. Lunsford. When he saw me, he cried, "Ms. Garver, help me!" My eyes filled with tears and I had to turn away for a few seconds. I regained my composure and told Mrs. Lunsford that I would take care of Eric. The look in her eyes told me that she was very thankful.

I took Eric by the hand and led him into the clinic. I patted my lap and motioned for him to sit on it. He jumped up and put his arms around me and sobbed. I didn't say a thing; I just started rocking back and forth. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and started sucking on it. His eyelids got heavy and before I knew it he had gone to sleep. I just kept rocking. The secretary came in and said that Eric's mother was on her way. I asked her to please give the referral papers to the principal so that he could talk to Mrs. Glover about evaluating Eric.

I was still rocking Eric when his mother arrived. Mrs. Glover saw us in the clinic and I could see that she was upset. Before she approached me, Mr. Shapiro spotted her and asked her to come into his office. My back was beginning to hurt and my arms were getting numb from holding Eric. I was afraid to wake him up until his mother was finished talking to Mr. Shapiro. After what seemed an eternity, the principal and Mrs. Glover walked into the clinic. His mother did not wake Eric; she simply took him in her arms and walked out the door.

When Mrs. Glover was out of sight, Mr. Shapiro told me that he had suspended Eric for three days. Mrs. Glover had given her signed permission for us to evaluate Eric for possible special education placement as a child with behavior disorders. Mr. Shapiro

made it clear that Eric's evaluation was a priority. I was to begin assessing his academic achievement as soon as he returned to school on Wednesday. The school psychologist was notified that Eric would be tested before any other student was evaluated.

Eric was absent the day he was scheduled to be evaluated by the school psychologist. I called Mrs. Glover at work, but she had not gone in that day. There was no answer at home either. Around noon, Mrs. Glover came to school to talk to the counselor. There had been more trouble at home. Eric found a gun in his father's coat pocket and he asked him about it. His daddy told him that he was a policeman now and that he had to carry a gun. Eric thought his daddy was lying so he called 911 and told the dispatcher that his daddy had tried to shoot him. When the police arrived, Eric met them at the door. When he was confronted by the police, Mr. Glover denied that he tried to shoot his son. Eric finally told the police that his daddy didn't really try to shoot him, but that his daddy carried a gun in his coat pocket. The police found the gun in one pocket and some cocaine in the other. Eric's father was handcuffed and hauled off to jail.

The following day Eric was back at school. Before the bell rang for school to begin, he ran around the playground telling nearly all of his classmates what had happened. By the time the bell rang, Eric was a hero. The students were all excited as they entered the classroom and Mrs. Lang had a difficult time getting them to settle down. Eric really seemed to enjoy the sensation he had created. During the morning, Eric tried hard in his reading group and worked independently on his folder assignments.

When the class lined up for lunch, Eric started crying. He then started screaming and threw his lunch card on the floor. He stomped on it several times and then yelled, "I hate this damn school!" Mrs. Lang sent a student to get me. As I approached her classroom, I saw Eric jump the steps outside her classroom and hit the ground running. I

hiked up my straight blue jeans skirt and took off after him. He ran into the building and down the fifth grade hall. I was several feet behind him and was running out of breath; my sides ached. Eric took a turn toward the cafeteria. There was a big crowd of students and he had to slow his pace. I finally caught him! Eric laughed hysterically as I escorted him back to class.

Mr. Shapiro had observed the chase and asked to see me in his office. As soon as I arrived he yelled that he wanted something done with this kid and he wanted it done fast. When he asked me why Eric hadn't been placed in a behavior disorders classroom; I explained he hadn't even been evaluated yet. Red-faced, Mr. Shapiro asked his secretary to get Mrs. Glover on the line. While he waited, he yelled at me to get Eric's lunch and bring it to the office. He continued to mutter that he would take care of Eric. I felt that Mr. Shapiro was insinuating that no one else had the capability to solve the problem. I bit my tongue and wondered what would happen next.

Questions:

1. Identify the responses from all adults to Eric's behavior. What are the different ideas for handling Eric and how does Eric respond to them?
2. Discuss this case from Eric's point of view. How is it different from the original case? Why is it different?
3. Identify antecedents, behaviors, and consequences for Eric's outbursts. What crisis management techniques could both the classroom teacher and Mrs. Garver use?
4. Recommend a behavior management program for Eric involving home and school. Note what legal rights and responsibilities need to be observed.
5. Identify the needs behind Eric's behavior. Determine how the teachers could help Eric meet his needs in a positive manner.
6. Identify how the home information affects the school situation. Determine

alternative ways the school can use this information to help Eric and his Mom.

7. Was Mrs. Lang acting ethically in discussing Mrs. Glover's information with Ms. Garver? Why or why not? Who else needed to know that information? Who does not need to know that information?
8. Mr. Shapiro and Ms. Garver evidently do not agree on how to handle Eric when he misbehaves. How does Ms. Garver feel Eric and his behavior should be managed? Mr. Shapiro? What would be best for Eric? Are they both working toward this?